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The Knowledge Imperative: Research for Democratic and Sustainable Development

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Good evening, ladies and gentlemen, and thank you for your warm and generous welcome. It is a great pleasure to be here in Dublin—and an honour to accept your invitation to University College.

I must confess, however, that I approach my subject today with an entirely appropriate degree of humility. There is no doubt in my mind about the importance of the "knowledge imperative"—and about the crucial place of research in advancing democratic and sustainable development. But at the same time, I am acutely alert to the truth that nobody understands these matters better than the people of Ireland.

This is a society that has transformed itself—and its future—by a bold and systematic application of learning and knowledge for your own development. Your successes are manifest, and they are recognized around the world.

So I ask myself, frankly, whether there is anything that Canadians can tell the Irish about the strategic investment of knowledge for national and international development.

My answer is that Canada, like Ireland, has committed its political and financial capital to a comprehensive, long-term strategy of innovation. And Canadians, like the Irish, are now directing more of their energies to the promotion of learning, knowledge and innovation in developing countries.

Indeed, our shared commitment to international development was played out recently in Canadian politics, when Canada's new prime minister invited the well-known Irishman Bono to address his own nominating convention in Toronto. Bono, like Prime Minister Martin, has argued with eloquence (and with knowledge) both the logic and then moral obligation of development cooperation. And that cooperation will be built on innovation.

Canada's own domestic innovation strategy was formally launched in February 2002—long after

the beginnings of Ireland's educational and economic transformation, it must be said. And the Canadian strategy is very much rooted in the particulars of Canadian life and experience, as every national strategy must be.

But the fundamentals of Canada's innovation agenda will be familiar to you all: its recognition of knowledge as a strategic national asset; its understanding of learning as the prerequisite of economic growth and social equity; and its focus on the urgent conversion of new knowledge—and the best of the new technologies—into better public policy.

I need not point out that the knowledge imperative is hardly a new discovery. In fact, these same fundamentals—knowledge as an asset, learning as both a private and a public good, and research for policy and action—these same fundamentals inspired the Act of Parliament that created Canada's International Development Research Centre in 1970.

The founding of IDRC more than 30 years ago faithfully reflected the internationalist values of Lester Pearson and Pierre Trudeau. And I can say, with some pride, that IDRC's operations today give true expression to those traditional Canadian values—and to Canada's rededication to innovation and home and abroad.

IDRC's mission from the start has been to encourage and finance research, in developing countries, on the problems and opportunities of development. What we have learned—not always without struggle and disappointment—is that knowledge can empower poor people in poor communities to improve their own lives and decide their own futures.

Empowering people through research and new knowledge can occur in vastly diverse ways and settings. A couple of examples will show what I mean.

My first example goes to the allocation of government spending for health care—always a difficult and contentious problem for any country, rich or poor. In rural Tanzania, a project called TEHIP (for Tanzania Essential Health Interventions Program) is achieving significant health improvements by involving communities and families in studying their own health needs. TEHIP began modestly in 1997, and its methods and findings are now being replicated in more regions across Tanzania.

The results? Public-health funds are being invested directly where people need them, and especially in the reduction of childhood sickness—in treating and preventing malaria, acute respiratory infection, measles, and the like. As participants in this research, families improve their lives and their futures.

Another case: In the Amazon basin, mercury poisoning has afflicted local people for generations. People absorb the mercury in the fish they eat, and the contamination has often been blamed on the use and abuse of mercury in gold mining. But research—done with the active participation and advice of villagers themselves—has discovered a very different source of mercury poisoning, and produced new ways to prevent it.

Research has found that most of the mercury contamination along those Amazon tributaries flows not from mining but from leaching and erosion of soils. By altering old practices of slash-and-burn agriculture, and changing the kinds of fish in their diet, people of the region are deploying their own new knowledge to prevent terrible neurological harm to themselves—and improving their well-being. By the way, this project was part of our growing activity in ecohealth—interdisciplinary research that examines the deep and extensive interactions of human health and the environment.

Still, knowledge does not empower people, or improve their lives, by some effortless inevitability. We have learned—through failures and successes—that the knowledge imperative is satisfied when three dynamics are in place. Think of these dynamics as the three Cs.

The first C is capacity-building. New knowledge can drive development when indigenous research capacity reaches a critical mass of sustainable competence and self-confidence. That means opportunities for developing-country researchers to be educated in the best of the new science and technologies. But it also means encouraging them to define and pursue their own development research, in close relationships with their own communities.

The second C is closing the loop, from research to policy to action. Researchers have to address policy-makers in language they understand. And they have to address development problems as policy-makers understand them. Policy-makers, for their part, need to open their minds to new questions and surprising answers. And they need to give researchers the freedom, and the money, to do their work.

This closing the loop requires building capacity of another kind—the capacity of developing-country economic and political systems to absorb and apply the fresh knowledge that research generates. And I have to say that closing the loop—connecting knowledge to policy and action—remains an imposing challenge everywhere.

The third C stands for collaboration—the partnerships and networks that characterize all productive development research.

Collaboration begins on a point of principle: the right that the people of any country have to participate in the decisions that govern their lives. But participation is only meaningful if it is informed. People need the hard facts that determine their choices. Which is all to say that poor people in their own communities have a right to collaborate in the design, execution and evaluation of development research.

But collaboration is also a practical necessity. We know, from experience, that development research only succeeds as an interdisciplinary enterprise, combining resources in new alliances of disparate perspectives and common purpose. That's why some of the liveliest and most valuable development research is achieved by some remarkably odd research partners—physicians and foresters, or lawyers and hydrologists, or agronomists and anthropologists.

These networks of collaboration, engaging governments and businesses and scholars and NGOs, and women and men in their own communities, breathe new life and meaning into the old platitude about thinking globally and acting locally. They also serve the pragmatic purpose of speeding new knowledge to where it is needed most, anywhere on the globe.

And speaking of practicalities, let me demonstrate by way of three quick examples—three promising research projects under way right now.

In Senegal, IDRC is supporting a wonderfully straightforward study of new technology in the service of poverty reduction. This project—known by its French acronym MANOBI—puts cellular phones, hand-held computers and Internet access into the hands of farmers, fishermen, and small traders in urban markets. Suddenly, producers and traders can share real-time data on changing prices and supplies.

And the preliminary results are dramatic. Armed with this timely information, rural producers have been increasing their own incomes by some 15 per cent. MANOBI's successes have been acknowledged internationally, with an award in Geneva last fall at the World Summit on the Information Society.

Here is another demonstration of technology for poverty reduction. The Uganda Health Network is connecting village doctors and other health-care professionals by cell phones and hand-held computers to university departments and government offices in Kampala, the capital. This pilot study delivers the latest treatment guidelines and drug therapies directly to practitioners in the field. But it also delivers up-to-date health and disease statistics from remote regions back to epidemiologists and policy-makers at the centre.

Outcomes are already encouraging. With cell phones and tiny computers powered by industrial-strength batteries, better health care is reaching villages that have never had telephones of any kind before—and have never even had reliable electricity. Meanwhile, instantly-available data can inform faster and more effective allocations of Uganda's health-care resources. Policy is better informed and better conducted, and directed primarily to benefit poor people.

Before moving to my third example, I want to say one more thing about these information and communication technologies in poverty reduction. Our recent experiences in these and many other research projects—in Africa, Asia and Latin America—convince us that ICTs can indeed reduce poverty, empower communities, and promote political and economic change. That is, they will if the right conditions prevail.

These "right conditions" deserve spelling out, and they are shaping our own current research on these issues.

The first right condition is the creation of a policy environment that enables both commercial and social ICT innovation and implementation. I'm referring here especially to designing the right regulatory regimes and tax policies to let innovation happen.

The second right condition for ICTs in poverty reduction is the support and fostering of digital entrepreneurship. Once more, this is an issue of good governance, making it possible to scale up good ideas to make services and content physically accessible, and affordable, to poor people.

The third right condition for ICTs in poverty reduction is the formation of new alliances between ICT developers and others already active in development work. That means building new coalitions with organizations working for women in development; for education; for health; and for democracy and good governance. In each of these areas, ICTs can accelerate pro-poor development.

Going back to my research examples: The last case I will put to you has everything to do with democracy and good governance. In the Kenya Transition Umbrella Program, IDRC is helping Kenyans themselves undertake the difficult administrative and political reforms that were made possible—but not inevitable—by Kenya's landmark election in 2002.

The Umbrella Program actually shelters a set of small and highly-targeted projects customized to specific needs—among them, devising and enforcing anti-corruption measures; expanding primary education; exploiting medicinal plants as part of the reconstruction of Kenyan agriculture; developing and conserving water resources; and strengthening the participation of civil society in Kenya's public life. The overall aim, again, is to improve the capacity of Kenyans to transform knowledge quickly into policy and action, by educating and engaging citizen participation.

The Kenya program illustrates another lesson in all of this—and a warning. Our three decades of development research have shown that research and civil and political rights are bound together, sometimes in a vicious circle and sometimes in virtuous symbiosis.

Good research, significant research, can only thrive and have effect where researchers and their community partners enjoy at least some minimum of civil and legal freedom. And by the same logic, good research can open social, economic and political systems to sudden and liberating progress in human well-being.

But the vicious circle can work just as powerfully in the opposite direction—as we have seen, with sometimes tragic consequences. Even the most innocuous or benign-looking research—because it introduces thoughts of empowerment and change—can alarm dictators and incite reaction. It is in the nature of oppressive and intolerant regimes to suppress pro-poor development research. Development research and democratization reinforce each other.

I will conclude now with a final thought, and a personal wish.

It seems to me, as I said a moment ago, that Canadians share with Irish men and women a rich capacity for learning and innovation—a capacity we can together share with the world. Neither of us, Irish or Canadians, are given much to self-promotion or even self-praise; we are each well aware of our own national idiosyncrasies. But I do believe, because we both have the histories to

prove it, that Ireland and Canada can form stronger and more far-reaching partnerships in the promotion of democratic and sustainable development.

And that is my wish—that we begin now to organize new and practical collaborations in development research. With that I will end, and I look forward to hearing your own ideas.

Thank you.